

THE SINO-VIET WAR: CAUSES, CONDUCT, AND CONSEQUENCES

by

CHARLES R. NELSON

Although the 28-day military campaign has ended, the full consequences of the Sino-Viet War will not be felt for some time. These consequences are likely to have profound and persisting effects on the major relationships in East Asia. Some of these effects are beginning to emerge, and a preliminary analysis suggests the following developments:

- *PRC-Vietnam* relations will be hostile as both sides upgrade military defenses along the 1300-kilometer border. The cost will be high to both sides. Vietnam will be forced to station additional troops along the Chinese border and develop a comprehensive mobilization plan. Both sides will support their allies in Cambodia.

- *USSR-Vietnam* relations will necessarily be expanded over the short term. The Vietnamese economy is in ruins following two wars in a three-month period, and the Soviet Union is the most likely source of badly needed aid. In return, the USSR has access to air and naval facilities in Vietnam. Over the longer term, however, Vietnam will seek to reduce its dependence on the Soviet Union.

- *PRC-USSR* relations will remain strained as the Soviets supply sophisticated weapons to a hostile Vietnam. China will seek to modernize the People's Liberation Army to contend with the threats now along both the northern and southern borders.

- *PRC-US* relations will not be significantly affected, although there will be some changes in domestic priorities. China's economic modernization campaign will be set back somewhat as defense spending is increased. The US may be more responsive to measures enhancing Taiwan's security, in view of PRC willingness to use military force.

- *US-Vietnam* relations will improve over the longer term as we attempt to make Hanoi less dependent on Moscow. In the near term, however, the refugee problem and the lingering POW issue will continue to be obstacles.

- *Cambodia* will turn to outside help, possibly an international conference, in the absence of anyone capable of restoring order. Pol Pot is despised both at home and abroad,

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Heng Samrin is unacceptably close to the Vietnamese, and Sihanouk lacks a domestic organization.

CAUSES OF THE WAR

The Chinese decision to attack Vietnam was not a rash, emotional response. In their words, “[The] policy decision was made after thorough deliberation. It took account of the whole strategic situation.”¹¹ The decision probably represented part of a long-term strategy for dealing with the Soviet threat. The immediate cause was the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in late December 1978, but the stakes were clearly higher than just retribution for the Vietnamese attack. The Chinese risked war with the Soviet Union, in view of the November 1978 USSR-Vietnam treaty. Relatively untested Chinese forces were pitted against the more modern and experienced Vietnamese Army, which enjoyed a reputation for having defeated both the French and the US. The Chinese also risked a setback in the rapidly improving relations with the US, since Deputy Chairman Deng Xiaoping had threatened to punish the Vietnamese while on his visit to the US, despite our counsel for restraint. Furthermore, the Chinese might have calculated that their attack would strengthen the desires of the American Congress to provide adequate means for the defense of Taiwan. Finally, the Chinese must have considered that the military campaign would set back their domestic “Four Modernizations” program.

All of these risks suggest that the PRC probably expected to derive long-term benefits far more substantial than the somewhat ambiguous satisfaction of having taught Vietnam a lesson. Beijing (Peking) must have decided that there was virtually no hope of contending with Soviet influence in Hanoi. The rapid incorporation of Vietnam into the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance in June of 1978 and the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Peace and Friendship in November clearly fostered the view that Hanoi had forsaken a neutral stance in the Sino-Soviet dispute. Further,

Beijing carefully compared the wording of the USSR-Vietnam treaty with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) concept of a zone of “peace, freedom, and neutrality” and concluded that the treaty’s use of “peace, independence, and cooperation” was deliberately selected to portray a new and substantially different relationship. The Chinese, quoting Soviet and Vietnamese sources, noted that the substitution of independence for neutrality in this context entails “international solidarity,” and that “without alignment with the ‘Socialist system,’ neutrality actually means isolation.”¹²

China foresaw that this chain of events would possibly include a large-scale Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, since Hanoi’s less direct military approach of late 1977 had failed to moderate the hostile Pol Pot government. On 3 December, the Vietnamese announced the establishment of the “Kampuchean Front” to overthrow Pol Pot. Also in early December, Beijing moved rapidly toward normalization of relations with the US, which culminated in the 15 December announcement that agreement had been reached for the establishment of full diplomatic relations on 1 January 1979.

This event, however, did not deter the 25 December Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia with more than 100,000 troops, despite repeated warnings from China. The invasion

Lieutenant Colonel Charles R. Nelson has been a Military Assistant to the Director of Net Assessment, Office of the Secretary of Defense, since 1978. He is a 1960 graduate of West Point and holds a master's degree in Far Eastern Studies from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D. in Political Science from Kansas University. He is also a graduate of the Army Command and General Staff College, where he taught Strategic Studies for four years. His East Asian experience includes assignments in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. He also has served on the Department of the Army Staff. Previous articles by Colonel Nelson have appeared in *Military Review*.



clearly indicated that the government in Hanoi was willing to act counter to strong Chinese interests. Furthermore, the invasion confirmed the view in Beijing that a Vietnam-dominated Indochina Federation was about to be realized. A strong, pro-Soviet Vietnam also threatened to dominate Southeast Asia over the longer term by gaining control of indigenous Communist parties and by using military coercion.³ Thus, from the Chinese point of view, if Vietnam were forced to become economically and militarily overextended, the threat to Southeast Asia would be reduced, and if internal conditions became too severe in Vietnam, the possibility of political change might result in a more cooperative Vietnamese leadership and a reduction in Soviet influence.

The specific causes of the war, according to Beijing, were the anti-China and anti-Chinese activities of the Vietnamese Government.⁴ The anti-China activities primarily refer to the Soviet-supported Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. This was an “encroachment of the independence and sovereignty of other countries,” in clear violation of the UN Charter and international law. Therefore, the measured Chinese response was “just,” taken in the interests of the international community and deserving worldwide popular support.⁵

The 1300-kilometer common border with Vietnam provides a ready pretext for military attacks. In fact, Beijing has reported hundreds of Vietnamese border provocations over the last several years. The current boundaries are largely the result of “unequal treaties” following a series of wars between the Chinese and French from 1879 to 1895. Thus, the Sino-Viet border provides a direct indication of the status of relations between Beijing and Hanoi at any one time.

The anti-Chinese activities of Vietnam refer to a series of measures that included the rapid nationalization of nearly all private businesses in the South, most of which were owned by overseas Chinese. These moves led to large-scale emigration by ethnic Chinese and several incidents at “Friendship Pass” as tensions escalated throughout the year.

There are, of course, a variety of other factors associated with the cause of the war that need to be considered. Of particular interest are the roles of the two superpowers. Despite the linkage made by the Chinese, there is no evidence that the Soviets encouraged the Vietnamese attack on Cambodia. Such an attack seemed inevitable by late 1978, regardless of the role played by the USSR. The November USSR-Vietnam treaty included provisions for taking “appropriate effective measures” in the event of an attack or threatened attack.⁶ Once the war with China began, the USSR provided visible support in terms of airlift, sealift, and a naval show of force. The Soviets also encouraged international support for Vietnam wherever possible. They recognized the new Cambodian Government on 19 January, only three days after Phnom Penh had fallen. The USSR was quick to second the 5 March demand by the Lao Government that the 18-year-old Chinese road construction program in Northern Laos be terminated, allegedly in response to PRC military provocations. These “provocations” were first cited by the Soviets only three days earlier, suggesting Moscow may have been behind the diplomacy. The Soviet Union in both the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and the Vietnamese defense against the Chinese attack was clearly following Hanoi’s lead. It is also doubtful whether a more positive US response to the early 1978 Vietnamese initiatives for normalization would have enabled the US to counter Soviet influence or restrain the Vietnamese attack on Cambodia.

The more important origins of the Sino-Viet War lie in the longstanding Vietnamese-Khmer animosity. In particular, the chain of events beginning with Pol Pot’s persistent provocations of Vietnam, and Hanoi’s responses from 1975 through 1978, are important to our better understanding of the subsequent war with China. Hanoi had been repeatedly frustrated in dealing with Pol Pot. The underlying friction between the Khmer Rouge and Viet Cong came to light in 1975 as several Vietnamese-trained Khmer Rouge

leaders were purged following the overthrow of Lon Nol. Pol Pot established "Free Fire" zones along the Vietnamese border; the repeated incidents that followed posed serious problems to the badly needed agricultural recovery efforts of Vietnam. The early 1978 limited Vietnamese military incursion into Cambodia and the subsequent call for negotiations were unsuccessful in achieving a more cooperative attitude in Phnom Penh.⁷ The deep-seated Khmer-Viet animosity suggests that the conflict will not easily be resolved. Furthermore, Thailand, China, and other nations in the region have strong interests in the outcome of the conflict.

THE CONDUCT OF THE WAR

The Chinese stressed from the beginning the limited goals, scope, and duration of the military campaign. The stated goals included punishing the government of Vietnam, not the people of that country. In so doing, China hoped to "explode the myth of an invincible Vietnam." By categorizing Vietnam as an "Asian Cuba," bent on establishing regional hegemony, China also sought to discredit the Soviet Union.

The scope of the military campaign was tailored to support these limited goals. The initial attack launched at about 26 points along the entire border on 17 February suggested something other than a concentrated, decisive military victory. The timing of the attack coincided with Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong's arrival in Phnom Penh to conclude a treaty with the new Cambodian Government. By geographically limiting the attack to the border area, the Chinese signaled that the survival of an independent Vietnam was never at stake. Had Hanoi become directly threatened, it could have led to a Soviet military response. Finally, the duration of the campaign was limited to 28 days. Although China could not calculate the precise time required to complete the military operations, the particular objectives selected were consistent with a brief incursion. Once Lang Son fell, on 5 March, the Chinese announced

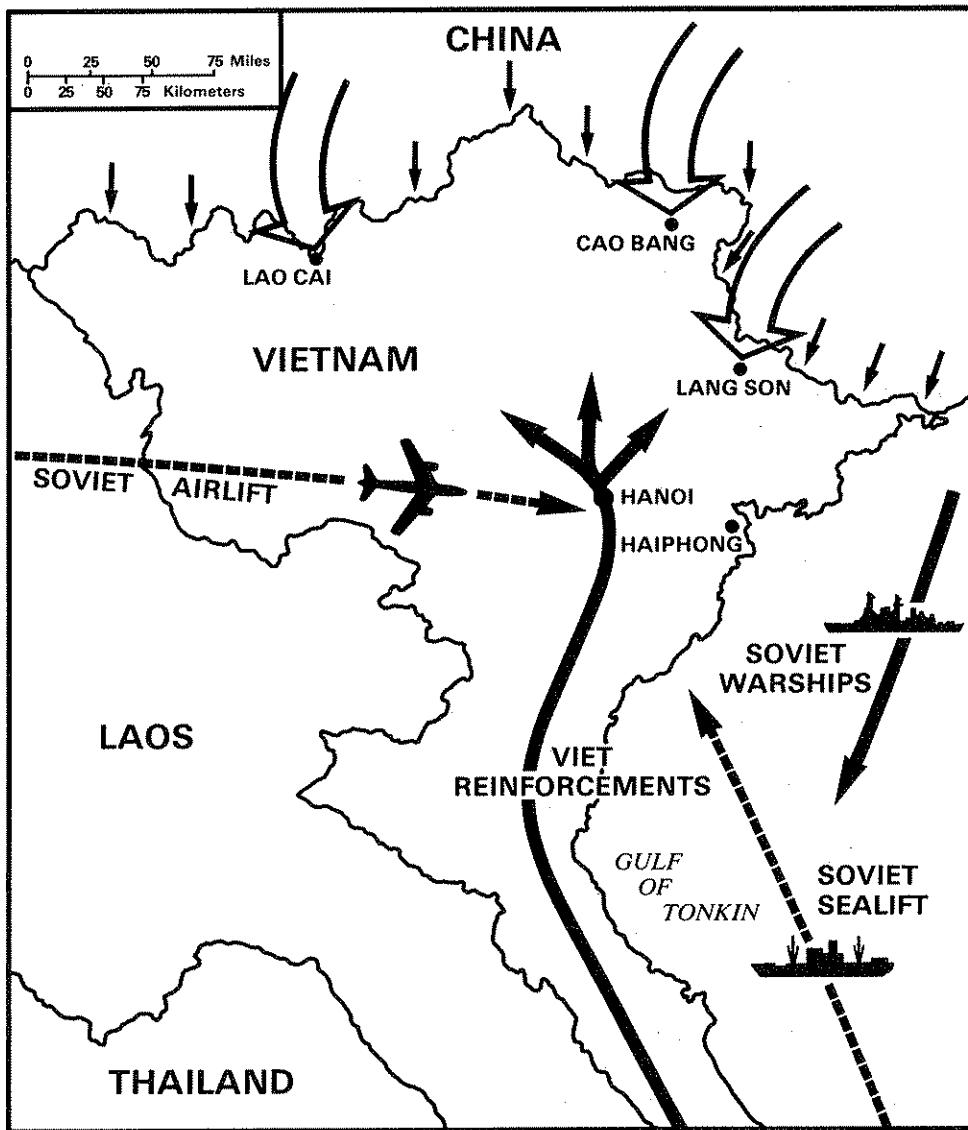
their intention to begin the withdrawal, which was completed by 16 March, according to the Chinese.⁸

The Chinese concept of operations for the Vietnam War is interesting. Most important, the military campaign was only one aspect of an integrated political and economic strategy. However, the actual military attack was not directly linked to any other conditions. That is, although the attack was due for the most part to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Chinese never made the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia an explicit condition for terminating their campaign. It was never intended to be a *quid pro quo* venture. Thus, the possibility of an endless escalation and test of national wills was reduced.

The military concept was to destroy virtually all economic, political, and military facilities within about 20 kilometers of the border. The Chinese massed sufficient forces and logistics in advance to virtually guarantee the military success of the campaign. Reporters have noted the widespread ruin and destruction in which not a single electric pole remains standing in Lao Cai, Lang Son, and Cao Bang. Bridges have been destroyed and nearly all buildings of any consequence, including hospitals, demolished.⁹ The use of dynamite in some cases, rather than artillery or tanks, points out that the underlying purpose was to ravage the economy. This conjecture is consistent with the Chinese cutoff of 72 major aid projects to Vietnam in May 1978 and the closure of the pipeline that supplied at least half of Vietnam's oil requirements in early 1979.¹⁰

The lack of any reported air combat in this campaign is also interesting. There apparently were no significant efforts to either establish or deny air superiority over the battlefield. Likewise, there was no reporting of interdiction or counter-air strikes by either side. This further suggests that both sides were careful to limit the scope of the war as much as possible.¹¹

The cost of the Vietnamese general mobilization, coming on the heels of the Cambodian invasion, must have been high. Casualty figures are uncertain, but unofficial



Chinese claims cite about 50,000 Vietnamese soldiers killed and wounded compared to 20,000 Chinese casualties.¹² While these figures may be exaggerated, the losses were undoubtedly high. These human and economic costs place a heavy burden on the government of Vietnam. This damaging situation was not substantially eased by the withdrawal of the Chinese troops. In fact, the domestic pressures on the government are certain to build. General mobilization was ordered in Vietnam on 5 March. There already are some indications of draft resistance in Vietnam, and, for the first time

since 1975, a significant number of the refugees from Vietnam are not ethnic Chinese.¹³

CONSEQUENCES OF THE WAR

For Vietnam, the price of fighting two wars in a period of three months was high. The economy along the Chinese border was devastated. The loss of Chinese aid and oil, along with aid reductions by Australia, Japan, Sweden, and Denmark, among others, will further retard the economic recovery of Vietnam. The combined effects

of the military operations, the reduction in outside help, and two years of floods and drought will force Vietnam to become more dependent on external support, particularly the Soviet Union.

Unconfirmed reports have suggested that another Soviet-Vietnam agreement was signed in February which permitted Soviet use of Vietnamese ports and airfields in return for Soviet military assistance.¹⁴ The subsequent calling of Soviet ships at Vietnamese ports and the use of Vietnamese airfields for Soviet long-range reconnaissance aircraft support such views.¹⁵ But it would seem quite out of character for Hanoi to allow foreign bases to become firmly established. It would symbolize a loss of sovereignty and independence that Vietnam has struggled for so long to achieve. Nevertheless, Vietnam will certainly be inclined to cooperate with the USSR whenever possible. While fighting continues in Cambodia, Soviet airlift, sealift, and reconnaissance flights would be helpful to Hanoi. Over the longer term, however, Japan, the US, and others can be expected to take steps to decrease the Vietnamese dependence on the USSR.

As a result of the increasing costs of the wars with China and Cambodia, domestic pressure on the Vietnamese Government is likely to increase. Vietnam will be forced to station more forces along the Chinese border and probably develop a system for rapidly mobilizing civilians into local defense units. All of this points to requirements for more soldiers, arms, ammunition, and centralized organization which will further retard economic growth.

Even before the recent war with China, the Vietnamese military effort was intense. According to the Chinese, Vietnam conscripted about 400,000 recruits and called 200,000 former soldiers back into service last year.¹⁶ Beijing claims that these steps have brought the Vietnamese armed forces to about 1.5 million, or about 50 percent greater than the force level at the end of the war against the United States.¹⁷ Such

claims seem unrealistically high; Hanoi may find it difficult simply to support more than 100,000 troops in Cambodia and perhaps 30,000 in Laos, while protecting the northern border. If the long-term Chinese strategy is successful, we can expect changes in the Vietnamese political leadership.

The consequences of the war for China also are serious. The PRC must live with hostile neighbors both to the north and to the south. In addition, the PRC would like to maintain some sort of a credible threat against Taiwan. In all three cases, the People's Liberation Army is outclassed in modern military equipment. The PLA experience in Vietnam may stimulate some new thinking about China's military posture and the regional priorities within the PRC. This rethinking might strengthen the case for a higher priority to the military component of the "Four Modernizations" program. Military modernization may be accompanied by reduced exports needed to finance technological imports. There already have been reports of major import contracts being canceled or cut back by the PRC. The net result may well be reduced rates of economic growth for China as well as Vietnam. To the extent that modernization is affected, there also may be some further consequences for Chinese domestic politics. The "Four Modernizations" program may have been the glue holding together Deng's alliance of military leaders, technicians, and party officials.

Despite Chinese claims that the attack on Vietnam was "just" and widely supported, there will be increasing doubts about the alleged peaceful intentions of China. The Soviets will likely refuse further Chinese offers to buy aircraft, helicopters, and other items of possible military utility. Similarly, there may be some reluctance on the part of European nations to sell military equipment to China, at least for some time. Eventually, however, the competition for profit from military sales will enable the PRC to gain some of the more advanced military technology.

Chinese efforts to improve relations with the US, India, and other countries may be temporarily set back as old concerns about PRC aggressiveness are revived. China also may find it difficult to reconcile its support for both Pol Pot and Sihanouk in any future international conference on Cambodia.

The Soviet Union also will feel the cost of the Sino-Viet War. The need for additional military and economic assistance for Vietnam will be considerable. The manner in which the USSR sought to spread the costs of assistance to Vietnam has led to friction within the socialist camp. For example, after China terminated aid projects to Vietnam in May 1978, the Soviets brought up the issue of Vietnam's membership in the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance in a surprise move on the final day of the 32d Council meeting in June 1978. The lack of prior consultation and the prospects for financial strain produced resentment among the East European members. Further friction could result if certain client states like North Korea also demand more modern military equipment such as that recently provided to Vietnam. Regardless of how accommodating the Soviets are, it is hard to imagine any long-term political gains in the region for Moscow. The Soviet collective security arrangement is not likely to gain in popularity while associated with an expansionist Vietnam. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian nations will be inclined to give more consideration to Soviet views in the future. The PRC can be expected to characterize every Soviet action as a drive for hegemony—a claim that is likely to fall on receptive ears in East Asia.

The implications of the war for the US are significant. They include possible Sino-Soviet conflict, Soviet bases in Southeast Asia, and an "Asian Cuba" capable of furthering Soviet influence in the region. The US response has sought to limit the prospects for expansion of conflict among the Communist nations.¹⁸ In essence, this calls for the US to remain a major force in Asia, thereby providing an alternative to further Sino-Soviet polarization. This decision probably will involve increased US economic and military assistance. Thailand, in particular,

may come under increased pressure from Vietnam for allowing China to support Pol Pot's forces using Thai territory. Thai Communist insurgents are likely to receive increased aid from Vietnam and enjoy sanctuaries in Laos. Such an increased role by Vietnam could lead to a struggle within the Thai Communist Party between the older, Thai-born Chinese leadership and the younger, indigenous Communists, trained and supported by the Viets.

The United States Senate, although clearly annoyed by the circumstances surrounding the Chinese attack, did not hesitate to confirm the appointment of Leonard Woodcock on 26 February as the first US Ambassador to the PRC while there was still some uncertainty as to the possible escalation of the war. The Chinese attack probably did, however, gain congressional support for a stronger US commitment to the defense of Taiwan than had originally been proposed in the legislation offered by the executive branch in January.

Significantly, both the US and USSR have attempted not to let the Indochina situation upset bilateral relations. SALT negotiations continued while both sides communicated their positions on Indochina, and the US chose not to match the Soviet show of naval force in the South China Sea during the Sino-Viet War. Such a move would have had little immediate effect on events and would have been detrimental to longer-term US-Soviet relations.

CONCLUSIONS

The Chinese military campaign against Vietnam was part of a larger strategy for countering the Soviet threat. Beijing recognized the similarities between recent trends in Asia and the evolution of Soviet-Cuban relations which went from "economic dependence to political submision."¹⁹ As in the Cuban case, Vietnamese military forces were expanded and provided with modern Soviet equipment. Most importantly, in both cases these forces were used for external aggression. These developments, culminating in the Soviet-supported Vietnamese invasion

of Cambodia, were unacceptable to China; hence, a long-term strategy was devised to neutralize the government in Vietnam. One aspect of this strategy was the brief military campaign against Vietnam.

The economic and political consequences of the Sino-Viet War are likely to affect the major relationships in East Asia for some time. The external and internal pressures on Hanoi are likely to persist and become even stronger. The cost to the Soviet Union of supporting Vietnam may even exceed that of supporting Cuba, while the potential benefits may be considerably less. In such a case, Vietnam may have to choose between a reduced capacity for domestic military regimentation and economic stagnation with some attendant domestic political risks.

In this context, the United States has sought to limit the potential for expansion of conflict between these Communist countries. This strategy is one of continued American involvement in the region, so that there remains an alternative to polarization between China and the Soviet Union. It seeks to promote a peaceful and prosperous environment throughout the region whereby traditional patterns of conflict and enmity will give way to interdependence and mutual trust.

NOTES

1. "Getting Big Victory in Self-Defense Counterattack," *Beijing Review*, 16 March 1979, p. 17.
2. "Independence as Trumpeted by Moscow and Hanoi," *Peking Review*, 8 December 1978, pp. 22-23.
3. "Soviet and Vietnamese Hegemonists' True Colors," *Peking Review*, 22 December 1978, pp. 16-19.
4. "Getting Big Victory in Self-Defense Counterattack," *Beijing Review*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
6. David K. Willis, "Moscow Puts Great Store on its Friendship Treaties," *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 April 1979, p. 3.
7. See Sheldon Simon, "New Conflict in Indochina," *Problems of Communism*, 27 (September-October 1978), 20-36.
8. Edward Wee, "China, Vietnam Trade Charges, Talks in Doubt," *Baltimore Sun*, 27 March 1979, p. 6.
9. Jean Thoraval, "Toll in China's Lesson is Heavy for Vietnamese," *The New York Times*, 27 March 1979, p. 3.
10. Eric Bourne, "Oil, Copters Sighted in Soviet-Sino-Viet Strategies," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 March 1979, p. 11.
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12. Drew Middleton, "China Says Its Losses in Vietnam Were 20,000 Killed and Wounded," *The New York Times*, 3 May 1979, p. 1.
13. *Ibid.*
14. L. Edgar Prino, "U.S. Says Hanoi Opens Ports to Soviet Ships," *San Diego Union*, 22 March 1979, p. 2.
15. Michael Parks, "Soviet Puts Spy Planes on Viet Soil," *Baltimore Sun*, 14 April 1979, p. 1.
16. "Vietnamese Authorities Agitate for War Against China," *Beijing Review*, 23 February 1979, p. 12.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Richard Burt, "U.S. is Formulating New Policy on Asia," *The New York Times*, 15 March 1979, p. 7.
19. "Cuba: From Economic Dependence to Political Submission," *Peking Review*, 15 December 1979, pp. 26-28.



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